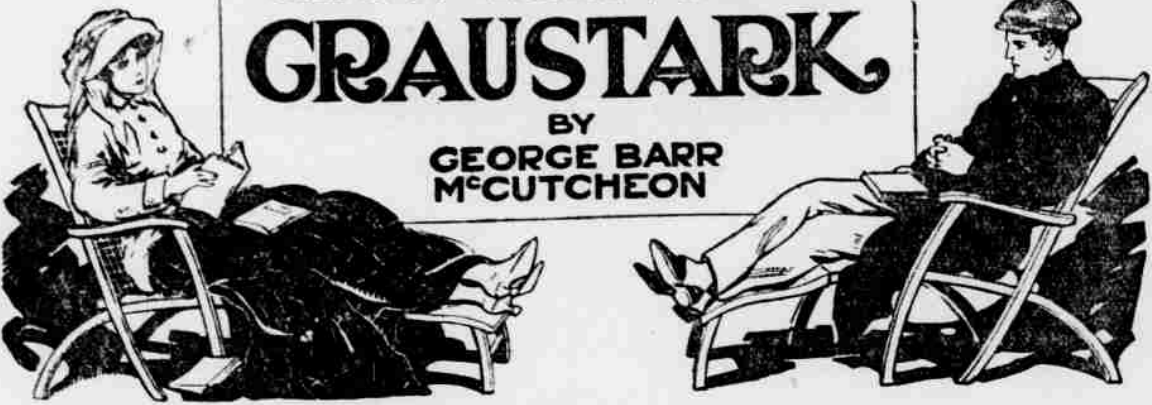


The PRINCE of GRAUSTARK

BY
GEORGE BARR
M'CUTCHEON



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CHAPTER II.

Mr. Blithers Goes Visiting.

A YEAR of grace remained. The minister of finance had long since recovered from the delusion that it would be easy to borrow from either England or France to pay the Russians, there being small prospect of a renewal by the czar, even for a short period at a higher rate of interest. The great nations of Europe made it plain to the little principality that they would not put a finger in Russia's pie at this stage of the game. Russia was ready to go to war with her great neighbor, Austria. Diplomacy—caution, if you will—made it imperative that other nations should sit tight and look to their own knitting, so to say. Not one could afford to be charged with befriending even in a roundabout way either of the angry grumblers.

It was only too well known in diplomatic circles that Russia coveted the railroads of Graustark as a means of throwing troops into a remote and almost impregnable portion of Austria. If the debt were paid promptly it would be impossible, according to international law, for the great White Bear to take over these roads and at least a portion of the western border of the principality. Obviously, Austria would be benefited by the prompt lifting of the debt, but her own relations with Russia were so strained that an offer to come to the rescue of Graustark would be taken at once as an open affront and vigorously resented. Her hands were tied.

The northern and western parts of Graustark were rich with productive mines. The government had built railroads throughout these sections so that the yield of coal and copper might be

quarter of a century before, he traveled incognito. But where she had used the somewhat emphatic name of Guggen-slocher he was known to the hotel registers as "Mr. R. Schmidt and servant."

There was romance in the eager young soul of Prince Robin. He revelled in the love story of his parents. The beautiful Princess Yvette first saw Grenfell Lorry in an express train going eastward from Denver. Their wonderful romance was born, so to speak, in a Pullman compartment car, and it thrived so splendidly that it almost upset a dynasty, for never in all of nine centuries had a ruler of Graustark stooped to marriage with a commoner.

And so when the farsighted ministry and house of nobles in Graustark set about to select a wife for their young ruler they made overtures to the Prince of Dawsbergen, whose domain adjoined Graustark on the south. The Crown Princess of Dawsbergen, then but fifteen, was the unanimous choice of the amiable matchmakers in secret conclave. This was when Robin was seventeen and just over being fatuously in love with his middle aged instructor in French.

The Prince of Dawsbergen dispatched an embassy of noblemen to assure his neighbor that the match would be highly acceptable to him and that in proper season the betrothal might be announced. But alas! both courts overlooked the fact that there was independent American blood in the two young people. Neither the Prince of Graustark nor the Crown Princess of Dawsbergen—whose mother was a Miss Beverly Calhoun of Virginia—was disposed to listen to the voice of expediency; in fact, at a safe distance of three or four hundred miles the youngsters figuratively turned up their noses at each other and frankly confessed that they hated each other and wouldn't be bullied into getting married, no matter what anybody said, or something of the sort.

"Spouse I'm going to say I'll marry a girl I've never seen!" demanded seventeen-year-old Robin, full of wrath. "Not I, my lords. I'm going to look about a bit, if you don't mind. The world is full of girls. I'll marry the one I happen to want or I'll not marry at all."

"But, highness," they protested, "you must listen to reason. There must be a successor to the throne of Graustark. You would not have the name die with you. The young princess is—"

"Is fifteen, you say," he interrupted loftily. "Come around in ten years and we'll talk it over again. But I'm not going to pledge myself to marry a child in short frocks, name or no name. Is she pretty?"

The lords did not know. They had not seen the young lady. "If she is pretty you'd be sure to know it, my lords, so we'll assume she isn't. I saw her when she was three years old, and she certainly was a fright when she cried, and, my lords, she cried all the time. No, I'll not marry her. Be good enough to say to the Prince of Dawsbergen that I'm very much obliged to him, but it's quite out of the question."

And the fifteen-year-old crown princess, 400 miles away, coolly informed her doting parents that she was tired of being a princess anyway and very much preferred marrying some one who lived in a cottage. In fine, she stamped her little foot and said she'd jump into the river before she'd marry the Prince of Graustark.

"But he's a very handsome, adorable boy," began her mother.

"And half American, just as you are, my child," put in her father encouragingly. "Nothing could be more suitable than—"

"I don't intend to marry anybody until I'm thirty at least, so that ends it, daddy—I mean your poor old highness."

"Naturally we do not expect you to be married before you are out of short frocks, my dear," said Prince Danton stiffly. "But a betrothal is quite another thing. It is customary to arrange these marriages years before—"

"Is Prince Robin in love with me?" "I—ahem—that's a very silly question. He hasn't seen you since you were a baby. But he will be in love with you, never fear."

"He may be in love with some one else, for all we know, so where do I come in?"

"Come in?" gasped her father.

"She's part American, dear," explained the mother with her prettiest smile.

"Besides," said the crown princess, with finality, "I'm not even going to be engaged to a man I've never seen. And if you insist, I'll run away as sure as anything."

And so the matter rested. Five years have passed since the initial overtures were made by the two courts, and although several sly attempts were made to bring the young people to a proper understanding of their case they aroused nothing more than scornful laughter on the part of the principals.

And no one saw the portentous shadow cast by the slim daughter of William W. Blithers, for the simple reason that neither Graustark nor Dawsbergen knew that it existed. They lived in serene ignorance of the fact that God, while he was about it, put Maud Applegate Blithers into the world

on precisely the same day that the crown princess of Dawsbergen first saw the light of day.

On the twenty-second anniversary of his birth Prince Robin fared forth in quest of love and romance, not without hope of adventure, for he was a valorous chap with the heritage of warriors in his veins. Said he to himself in dreamy contemplation of the long journey ahead of him: "I will traverse the great highways that my mother trod, and I will look for the Golden Girl sitting by the wayside. She must be there, and though it is a wide world, I am young and my eyes are sharp. I will find her sitting at the roadside eager for me to come, not housed in a gloomy castle surrounded by the spoils of a hundred ancestors. They who live in castles wed to hate, and they who wed at the roadside live to love. Fortune attend me! If I lie at the roadside waiting do not let me pass it by. All the princesses are not inside the castles. Some sit outside the gates and laugh with glee, for love is their companion. So away I go, la, la, looking for the prince with the happy heart and the smiling lips! It is a wide world, but my eyes are sharp. I shall find my princess."

But, alas, for his fine young dream, he found no golden girl at the roadside nor anything that suggested romance. There were happy hearts and smiling lips, and all for him, it would appear, but he passed them by, for his eyes were sharp and his wits awake. And so at last he came to Gotham, his heart as free as the air he breathed, confessing that his quest had been in vain. History failed to repeat itself. His mother's romance would stand alone and shine without a flicker to the end of time. There could be no counterpart.

"Well, I had the fun of looking," he philosophized to himself, for no man knew of his secret project and grumbled with a sort of amused tolerance for the sentimental side of his nature. "I'm a silly ass to have even dreamed of finding her as I passed along, and if I had found her what the devil could I have done about it anyway? This isn't the day for medieval lady snatching. I dare say I'm just as well off for not having found her. I still have the zest for hunting further, and there's a lot in that." Then aloud, "Hobbs, are we on time?"

"We are, sir," said Hobbs without even glancing at his watch. The train was passing One Hundred and Twenty-fifth street. "To the minute, sir. We will be in ten minutes if nothing happens. Mr. King will be at the station to meet you, sir. Any orders, sir?"

"Yes; pinch me, Hobbs." "Pinch your highness?" in amazement. "My word, sir, not!" "I just want to be sure that the dream is over, Hobbs. Never mind. You needn't pinch me. I'm awake," and to prove it he stretched his fine young body in the ecstasy of realization.

That night he slept soundly in the Catskills.

Toward the end of his first week at Red Roof, the summer home of the Truxton Kings, the prince might have been found on the broad lawn late one afternoon playing tennis with his hostess, the lovely and vivacious "Aunt Lorraine." To him Mrs. King would always be "Aunt Lorraine," even as he would never be anything but Bobby to her.

She was several years under forty and as light and active as a young girl. Her smooth cheek glowed with the happiness and thrill of the sport, and he was hard put to hold his own against her, even though she insisted that he play his level best.

Truxton King, stalwart and lazy, lounged on the turf, umpiring the game, attended by two pretty young girls, a lieutenant in flannels and the ceremonious Count Quinnox, iron gray and gaunt faced battlemaster with the saber scars on his cheek and the bullet wound in his side.

"Good work, Raine!" shouted the umpire as his wife safely placed the ball far out of her opponent's reach.

"Hi!" shouted Robin, turning on him with a scowl. "You're not supposed to cheer anybody, d'you understand? You're only an umpire."

"Outburst of excitement, kid," apologized the umpire complacently. "Couldn't help it. Forty thirty. Get busy."

"He called him 'kid,'" whispered one of the young girls to the other.

"Well, I heard the prince call Mr. King 'Truck' a little while ago," whispered the other.

"Isn't he good looking?" sighed the first one.

They were sisters, very young, and lived in the cottage across the road with their widowed mother. Their existence was quite unknown to Mr. and Mrs. Blithers, although the amiable Maud was rather nice to them. She had once picked them up in her automobile when they were encountered there walking to the station. After that she called them by their Christian names and generously asked them to call her Maud. It might appear from this that Maud suffered somewhat from loneliness in the great house on the hill. The Welton girls had known Robin a scant three-quarters of an hour and were deeply in love with him. Fannie was eighteen

and Nellie but little more than sixteen. He was their first prince.

"Whew-ee!" shrilled Mrs. King, going madly after a return that her opponent had lobbed over the net. She missed.

"Deuce," said her husband laconically. A servant was crossing the lawn with a tray of iced drinks. As he neared the recumbent group he paused irresolutely and allowed his gaze to shift toward the road below. Then he came on, and as he drew alongside the interested umpire he leaned over and spoke in a low tone of voice.

"What?" demanded King, squinting.

"Just come in the gate, sir," said the footman.

King shot a glance over his shoulder and then sat up in astonishment.

"Good Lord! Blithers! What the deuce can he be doing here? I say, Lorraine! Hi!"

"Vantage in," cried his pretty wife, dashing a stray lock from her eyes.

Mr. King's astonishment was genuine. It might better have been pronounced bewilderment. Mr. Blithers was paying his first visit to Red Roof. Up to this minute it is doubtful if he ever had accorded it so much as a glance of interest in passing. He bowed to King occasionally at the station, but that was all.

But now his manner was exceedingly friendly as he advanced upon the group. One might have been pardoned for believing him to be a most intimate friend of the family and given to constantly dropping in at any and all hours of the day.

CHAPTER III.

Protecting the Blood.

THE game was promptly interrupted. It would not be far wrong to say that Mrs. King's pretty mouth was open not unashamedly as an aid to breathing. She couldn't believe her eyes as she slowly abandoned her court and came forward to meet their advancing visitor.

"Take my racket, dear," she said to one of the Feltons. It happened to be Fannie, and the poor child almost fainted with joy.

The prince remained in the far court, idly twirling his racket. "Afternoon, King," said Mr. Blithers, doffing his Panama to fan a heated brow. "Been watching the game from the road for a spell. Out for a stroll. Couldn't resist running in for a minute. You play a beautiful game, Mrs. King. How do you do? Pretty hot work, though, isn't it?"

He was shaking hands with King and smiling graciously upon the trim, panting figure of the prince's adversary.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Blithers," said King, still staring. "You—you know my wife?"

Mr. Blithers ignored what might have been regarded as an introduction and blandly announced that tennis

wasn't a game for fat people, patting his somewhat aggressive extension in mock dolefulness as he spoke.

"You should see my daughter's play," he went on. "Got a medal at Lakewood last spring. I'll fix up a match soon, Mrs. King, between you and Maud. Ought to be worth going miles to see, eh, King?"

"Oh, I am afraid, Mr. Blithers, that I am not in your daughter's class," said Lorraine King, much too innocently.

"We've got a pretty fair tennis court up at Blitherswood," said Mr. Blithers calmly. "I have a professional instructor up every week to play with Maud. She can trim most of the amateurs, so—"

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Blithers," mumbled King. "Permit me to introduce Count Quinnox and Lieutenant Dank." Both foreigners had arisen and were standing very erect and soldierly a few yards away. "You know Miss Felton, of course."

"Delighted to meet you, count," said Mr. Blithers, advancing with outstretched hand. He shook the hand of the lieutenant with a shade less energy. He affected a most degeant manner, squinting carelessly at the prince.

"That young chap plays a nice game. Who is he?"

"The two Graustarkians stiffened perceptibly and waited for King to make the revelation to his visitor.

"That's Prince Robin of—," he began, but Mr. Blithers cut him short with a genial wave of the hand.

"Of course," he exclaimed, as if annoyed by his own stupidity. "I did hear that you were, entertaining a

and Nellie but little more than sixteen. He was their first prince.

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"Won't you sit down, Mr. Blithers?" said Mrs. King. "Or would you prefer a more comfortable chair on the porch?"

"No, thanks, I'll stay here if you don't mind," said he hastily and dragged up the camp chair that Lieutenant Dank had been occupying.

"Fetch another chair, Lucas," said King to the servant. "And another glass of lemonade for Miss Felton."

"Felton?" queried Mr. Blithers, sitting down very carefully on the rather fragile chair and hitching up his white flannel trousers at the knees to reveal a pair of purple socks, somewhat elementary in tone.

"We know your daughter, Mr. Blithers," said little Miss Nellie eagerly. "I was just trying to remember—"

"We live across the road—over there in the little white house with the—"

"—where I'd heard the name," proceeded Mr. Blithers, still looking at the prince. "By Jove, I should think my daughter and the prince would make a rattling good match. I mean," he added, with a boisterous laugh, "a good match at tennis. We'll have to get 'em together some day, eh, up at Blitherswood. How long is the prince to be with you, Mrs. King?"

"It's rather uncertain, Mr. Blithers," said she and no more.

Mr. Blithers fanned himself in patience for a moment or two. Then he looked at his watch.

"Getting along toward dinner time up our way," he ventured. Everybody seemed rather intent on the game, which was extremely one sided.

"Good work!" shouted King as Fannie Felton managed to return an easy service.

Lieutenant Dank applauded vigorously. "Splendid!" he cried out. "Capitally placed!"

"They speak remarkably good English, don't they?" said Mr. Blithers in an audible aside to Mrs. King.

She smiled. "Officers in the Graustark army are required to speak English, French and German, Mr. Blithers."

"It's a good idea," said he. "Maud speaks French and Italian like a native. She was educated in Paris and Rome, you know. Fact is, she's lived abroad a great deal."

"Is she at home now, Mr. Blithers?" "Depends on what you'd call home, Mrs. King. We've got so many I don't know just which is the real one. If you mean Blitherswood, yes, she's there. Course there's our town house in Madison avenue, the place at Newport, one at Nice and one at Pasadena, Cal. you know, and a little shack in London. By the way, my wife says you live quite near our place in New York."

"We live in Madison avenue, but it's a rather long street, Mr. Blithers. Just where is your house?" she inquired rather spitefully.

He looked astonished. "You surely must know where the Blithers house is at—"

"Game!" shrieked Fannie Felton, tossing her racket in the air, a victor.

"They're through," said Mr. Blithers in a tone of relief. He shifted his legs and put his hands on his knees, suggesting a readiness to arise on an instant's notice.

"Shall we try another set?" called out the prince.

"Make it doubles," put in Lieutenant Dank, and turned to Nellie. "Shall we take them on?"

And doubles it was, much to the disgust of Mr. Blithers. He sat through the nine games, manifesting an interest he was far from feeling.

To his utter amazement at the conclusion of the game the four players made a dash for the house without even so much as a glance in his direction. It was the prince who shouted something that sounded like "now for a shower!" as he raced up the terrace, followed by the other participants.

Mr. Blithers said something violent under his breath, but resolutely retained his seat. It was King who glanced shyly at his watch this time and subsequently shot a questioning look at his wife. She was frowning in considerable perplexity and biting her firm, red lips. Count Quinnox coolly arose and excused himself with the remark that he was off to dress for dinner. He also looked at his watch, which certainly was an act that one would hardly have expected of a diplomat.

"Well, well," said Mr. Blithers profoundly. Then he looked at his own watch—and settled back in his chair, a somewhat dogged expression about his jaws. He was not the man to be thwarted. "You certainly have a cozy little place here, King," he remarked after a moment or two.

"We like it," said King, twiddling his fingers behind his back. "Humble, but homelike."

"Mrs. Blithers has been planning to come over for some time, Mrs. King. I told her she oughtn't to put it off—be neighborly, don't you know. That's me. I'm for being neighborly with my neighbors. But women, they—well, you know how it is, Mrs. King. Always something turning up to keep 'em from doing the things they want to do most. And Mrs. Blithers has so many social obligations—"

"I was just wondering if you would stay and have dinner with us, Mr. Blithers," said she, utterly helpless. She couldn't look her husband in the eye—and it was quite fortunate that she was unable to do so, for it would have resulted in a laughing duel that could never have been explained.

"Why," said Mr. Blithers, arising and looking at his watch again, "bless my soul, it is past dinner time, isn't it? I had no idea it was so late. 'Pon my soul, it's good of you, Mrs. King. You see, we have dinner at 7 up at Blitherswood, and—"

"I declare, it's half past now! I don't see where the time has gone. Thanks! I will stay if you really mean to be kind to a poor old beggar. Don't do anything extra on my account, though—just your regular dinner, you know. No frills, if you please." He looked himself over in some uncertainty. "Will this rag of mine do?"

"Pray do not think of it!" she cried. "The men change, of course, after they've been playing tennis, but we—well, you see, you haven't been

playing," she concluded quite breathlessly.

At that instant the sprightly Feltons dashed pellmell down the steps and across the lawn homeward, shrieking something unintelligible to Mrs. King as they passed.

"They are dears," said Mrs. King. "The—er—prince attracted by either one of 'em?" he queried.

"He barely knows them, Mr. Blithers."

"I see. Shouldn't think they'd appeal to him. Rather light, I should say—I mean up here," and he tapped his forehead so that she wouldn't think that he referred to pounds and ounces. "I don't believe Maud knows 'em, as the little one said. Maud is rather—"

"It is possible they have mistaken some one else for your daughter," said she very gently.

"Impossible," said he, with force. "They are coming back here for dinner," she said, and her eyes sparkled with mischief. "I shall put you between them, Mr. Blithers. You will find that they are very bright, attractive girls."

"We'll see," said he succinctly.

King caught them up at the top of the steps. He seemed to be slightly out of breath.

"Make yourself at home, Mr. Blithers. I must get into something besides these duds I'm wearing," he said. "Would you like to—er—wash up while we're—"

"No, thanks," interposed Mr. Blithers. "I'm as clean as a whistle. Don't mind me, please. Run along and dress, both of you. I'll sit out here and—count the minutes," the last with a very elaborate bow to Mrs. King.

"Dinner's at half past 8," said she and disappeared. Mr. Blithers recalled his last glance at his watch and calculated that he would have at least fifty minutes to count, provided dinner was served promptly on the dot. So he settled himself in the big porch chair and scowled more deeply than before.

Later on he met the prince. Very warmly he shook the tall young man's hand—he even gave it a prophetic second squeeze—and said: "I am happy to welcome you to the Catskills, prince."

"Thank you," said Prince Robin. "A most extraordinary person," said Count Quinnox to King after Mr. Blithers had taken his departure, close upon the heels of the Feltons, who were being escorted home by the prince and Dank. The venerable Graustarkian's heroic face was a study. He had just concluded a confidential hour in a remote corner of the library with the millionaire while the younger people were engaged in a noisy though temperate encounter with the roulette wheel at the opposite end of the room. "I've never met any one like him, Mr. King." He mopped his brow and still looked a trifle dazed.

King laughed. "There isn't any one like him, count. He is the one and only Blithers."

"He is very rich?" "Millions and millions," said Mrs. King. "Didn't he tell you how many?" "I am not quite sure. This daughter of his—is she attractive?" "Rather. Why?"

"He informed me that her dot would be twenty millions if she married the right man. Moreover, she is his only heir. 'Pon my soul, Mrs. King, he quite took my breath away when he announced that he knew all about our predicament in relation to the Russian loan. It really sounded quite—you might say significant. Does—does—he imagine that—good heaven, it is almost stupefying!"

"Sounds ominous to me," said King dryly. "Is Bobby for sale?"

The count favored him with a look of horror. "My dear Mr. King! Then as comprehension came, he smiled. 'I see. No, he isn't for sale. He is a prince, not a pawn. Mr. Blithers may be willing to buy, but—' He proudly shook his head.

"He was feeling you out, however," said King, ruminating. "Planting the seed, so to speak."

The count seemed to be turning something over in his mind. "Your amazing Mr. Blithers further confided to me that he might be willing to take care of the Russian obligation for us if no one else turns up in time. As a matter of fact, without waiting for my reply, he said that he would have his lawyers look into the matter of security at once. Amazing, amazing!"

"Of course you told him it was not to be considered," said King sharply. "I endeavored to do so, but I fear he did not grasp what I was saying. Moreover, I tried to tell him that it was a matter I was not at liberty to discuss. He didn't hear that, either."

"He is not in the habit of hearing any one but himself, I fear," said King.

"I am afraid poor Robin is in jeopardy," said his wife ruefully. "The boggy man is after him."

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